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The Cross and the Cauldron: The Relationship between Religion and Magic in Selected Medieval and Modern Arthurian texts

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There shall not be found among you anyone . . . that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination to the LORD.

Deuteronomy 18: 10-12 (KJV)

And the third sister, Morgan le Fay, was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy.

Sir Thomas Malory

Abstract

Magic and Christianity have an interesting relationship in the Arthurian texts. They are both integral to the stories, but their presence together is difficult to reconcile. In medieval minds, magic was evil and not to be dealt in. Since Arthur was seen as a Christian king, magic which was outside of or opposed to his court was acceptable within the context of the story. Unfortunately, Merlin is an important part of the story, and some of his actions are definitely wrong. If Merlin's characterization is important to the author, some sort of compromise must be worked out in the text, or else Merlin must be relegated to the background. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's works, Merlin is presented as a figure with ties to antiquity, while Robert de Boron sets him up as a character who maintains a balance between heaven and hell. In modern works, the tension is not so pronounced because Arthur's Christianity has often been relegated to the background. However, Stephen Lawhead and Marion Zimmer Bradley both deal with the relationship between magic and Christianity in their works. Lawhead uses the relationship to express a message of the truth of Christianity, while Bradley explores the nature of a religiously pluralistic society.

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Magic is Dorothy clicking her Ruby Slippers together. Magic is a rabbit in a hat. It is found in Narnia, Wonderland, and a hundred worlds of children's storybooks. It is found in Middle-Earth and Mallorea and the worlds of fantasy literature. It is also in the history books, in Salem Village and the burning of Jeanne d'Arc. Magical were Merlin and Morgan le Fay.

Christianity is a highly energetic prayer meeting in a small Southern church. Christianity is a solemn mysterious rite in a great European cathedral. It is found across the world and throughout world history. It, too, was in Massachusetts Bay and present in Orléans. Christian were the noble knights of the Round Table in their search for the Holy Grail. The literature surrounding the knights of Camelot contains many events and many legendary persons, both Christian and magical.

The tales surrounding the mythical King Arthur have developed from several sources and have been shaped by many factors: Celtic folklore, Latin histories, early Christianity, the decades of conquest and reconquest of the island of Britain, and medieval courtly society. As a result of this, the body of Arthurian works often encompasses paradox and contradiction. An example is that Arthur sometimes receives his sword from the Lady of the Lake, and at other times, draws it from the Stone (or both). A frequent paradox within works is the coexistence of magic and Christianity.

One integral part of the Arthurian mythos is the frequent appearance of magical elements, but at the same time, the story as a whole remains strongly Christian. King Arthur's knights fight giants, victims of enchantments, and invisible knights; foes often incorporate some

magical elements.[1] The knights themselves are blessed with good enchantments, as well. For example, Lancelot carries a ring capable of dispelling illusion, given him by his foster mother, the Lady of the Lake (Chrètien, *Cart* 198-199). The knights encounter many wondrous adventures in the old stories; Yvain finds a magical spring whose water summons a great storm when sprinkled on a stone tablet (Chrètien, *Lion*). Christian elements pervade most Arthurian tales, if only because this was such an important aspect of the society which produced them. The mysterious *graal* of Chrètien de Troyes becomes the Holy Grail soon after in the Vulgate and post-Vulgate cycles. This cup, which becomes a sacred Christian symbol, is the part of the focus of Malory's famous rendition of the Arthurian legends. Arthur himself is seen as a Christian king, beginning with Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* when he carries an image of the Virgin Mary into battle (Wilhelm, "Latin" 5).

A good example of the paradox inherent in the presence of both magic and Christianity can be seen in depictions of the character of Merlin. Arthur's men stand aghast as Merlin uses his devilish art to help them lift the tremendous Irish stones and transport them to England where they will become Stonehenge, the greatest of pagan temples (Geoffrey, *History* 197-198). His sorcery enables him to alter Uther Pendragon's appearance so that he might beguile a virtuous woman into unknowing adultery. Is this wizard the same man who would become the most trusted counselor of the most Christian of kings -- the child of this passionate encounter in the isolated castle of Tintagel? How could Arthur Pendragon, the defender of the faith, have as

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[1]A giant is faced by Yvain in Chrétien's *The Knight with the Lion.* The invisible knight is Sir Garlon in the tale of "Balin, or the Knight with Two Swords" in Malory's *La Morte Darthur.* Erec frees a foe from the enchantment known as The Joy of the Court in Chrétien's *Erec and Enide.*

his beloved advisor the son of a devil, a man who would end his life beguiled into a tomb by his lecherous impulses toward another young woman (Rosenberg 362-363)? These questions are even more significant when it is considered these tales were first conceived in the medieval mind (which would prefer to burn or hang a witch over any rational discussion of the issue).

There is an abundance of early Christian writing on magic and magical practices; this allows for exploration of the historical relationship between magic and Christianity. Valerie Flint, whose detailed study of this subject is invaluable, defines magic as:

> the exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they. The combination of human and superhuman power will sometimes employ strange instruments and is always liable to produce remarkable and unaccustomed results. Thus we may expect an element of the irrational, and of the mysterious too, in a process that deserves to be called magical. (3)

By this definition, it is apparent that many Christian miracles could legitimately be called magical from an outsiders point of view -- even, perhaps, the Mass of the medieval Church. In much the same fashion, hagiographic stories are full of events that could be classified as magic. In the mind of the Christians of the medieval period, however, God as this "more powerful force" was acceptable as a source of preternatural abilities whereas other forces were not. The early Christian writings are usually an attempt to define what was appropriate for Christians to believe and practice. These writings usually took one of two responses: treating the practices of the pagan religion Christianity was supplanting as evil magic (i.e. the devil's work), or assimilating some of the pagan practices as an apparently harmless means of keeping the people

happy.

The first response draws from both the major Roman opinions of the time and religious feeling. Professional practitioners of magic, usually referred to as magia, apparently worried, upset, or irritated many Romans of the first four centuries of the common era. Pliny the Elder and Lucan both condemned the magia as fraudulent and disgusting (Flint 13-17). Jewish tradition also played a large role in shaping early Christian policy. Canonical books of the Hebrew Scriptures express the view that the God of the Hebrews disliked magic and frequently protected his servants from evil magicians.[2] The psuedepigraphical book of Enoch shows the entire practice of magic to be a highly suspect activity since it stemmed from the teachings of fallen angels (Flint 18). John Cassian, in 420 AD, furthered this view among early Christians. He claimed that magic was the attempt by humans to control the legions of demons who fell with Lucifer, invoking them by incantations and the like. The appropriate way to deal with demons in his view was to contain them by the power of Christ. In the early medieval Christian mind, the practices of magia were frequently seen as frightening and fearful (Flint 21).

The behavior of the people and the opinion of the Church were two very different things, however. Historical records from throughout Europe show the modern scholar that there were hordes of practitioners of various kinds: harioli, sortilegi, soothsayers, haruspex, maleficos, etc. (Flint 59-68).[3] Despite the Church's feelings, the people seemed to consult these magia in times

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[2] There are repeated prohibitions against magical activity in the Pentateuch; some of these can be found in Exodus 22:18, Leviticus 20:6, and Deuteronomy 18:10-13. Several of the most hated characters of Hebrew history are associated with magic, including Jezebel and Manasseh. In Exodus, God protects Moses from the magic of the Pharaoh's sorcerers.

[3] Harioli call up demons through sacrifices, while sortilegi are lot casters who also make predictions through automatic writing. Haruspex dealt in examining the days and hours for

of sickness, in matters of love, to deal with weather, and to predict the future. Treating the magia as real threats, the Church's preferred method of dealing with magic was to call on God to perform some miracle which would discredit and/or overpower the evil sorcerers, which He usually did -- in the stories, at least (Flint 69-71). The other response of the medieval church was usually more covert; accommodation and absorption were also used when it was apparent that annihilation of pagan practices was impractical (Flint 76).

The situation in Britain was shaped mostly by the second reaction to magic. The Venerable Bede, among others, quotes Pope Gregory the Great as writing:

> I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, . . . that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. . . [in the temples] build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. . . Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God, (qtd. in Flint 76-77)

This conversion of temples and rites led to the absorption of some magical activities as well. The conversion of pre-Christian sacred places into blessed places is a well documented example (Flint 254-257). Saints were capable of many of the same effects as the magia: healing, flight, knowledge of the future, and others.[4]

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significance to journeys and such. Soothsayers and maleficos are both, by the medieval period, general terms for magicians, with malefico taking on a decidedly negative connotation (Flint 52-53).

[4]These effects can still be seen in modern sociological studies of Celtic areas. On the isle of "Inis Beag," there is a sacred well dating back to the time of the druids (Messenger 97). It is also believed that the famous Irish saint Brigid was once a pagan goddess (Bradley 875).

Despite the incorporation of some magic into Christianity there were still very definite things which were considered wrong. Simon Magus, a minor character from the eighth chapter of the book of Acts, became an image of all that was wrong about magic in apocryphal writings. His powers included flight, shape changing, invisibility, intangibility, and many others. His power was used to attempt to discredit the apostles and dishonor God. He died when Simon Peter commanded the angels who carried him in his flight to drop him (Flint 338-340). The key to the acceptability of magical activities would seem to be the intent of use and the source of the power.

As far as the Arthurian texts are concerned, in most cases, magic and Christianity both play a large part. Christianity is important because the Christian writers of the medieval period usually made it so, explicitly or implicitly. Magic has been a part since the very beginning, due, presumably, to the Welsh influence. Arthurian material is firmly entrenched in Welsh tradition by the twelfth century when many of the early works were written (Bollard 11). The allusion to Arthur in the *Gododdin* (the likeliest candidate for the earliest mention of the king) shows that Arthur had a legendary presence by the year 600 (Bollard 12, Lacy and Ashe xiv). *Culhwch and Olwen*, the oldest Arthurian tale (probably composed in the eleventh century), is typical of Welsh folk literature in that it is filled with many supernatural and magic elements and has little or no Christian influence. However, in the Latin histories which later pick up the thread of the legend, magic does not play as large a role as it did in the Welsh works nor as it would in the French and English romances which were to come.

From his incorporation into the Latin histories of and French romances in the twelfth century, the fact of Arthur as Christian monarch cannot be denied. Geoffrey of Monmouth picks

up on the brief passages by his predecessors (Nennius and William of Malmesbury) which describe a Christian victory for Arthur. In all three accounts, Arthur uses a shield bearing the image of the Virgin Mary to win the battle of Mount Badon, but, in Geoffrey's tale, the entire army is roused into a Christian fervor by the Bishop Dubricius (Wilhelm, "Latin" 5, 7; Geoffrey, *History* 217). The Christianity of Arthur's court begins there but makes appearances throughout the literature. Its appearances in the French romances is usually very implicit and understated (adultery was, after all, apparently an important social institution for Arthur's courtiers as depicted in the romances). The structure of these romances usually involves a cyclical pattern in which the knight leaves the court, the embodiment of all civilization, and enters the wilderness, where he encounters all kinds of wonders and foes, before returning to court at the last (Howes). The court, as a civilized place, is presumably also a Christian place. The Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* deals more explicitly with Christianity; it sets up Gawain as the perfect Christian knight (though not devoid of flaws), describing him in this way:

> it suits well this knight and his unsullied arms;
> for ever faithful in five points, and five times under each,
> Gawain as good was acknowledged and as gold refined,
> devoid of every vice and with virtues adorned. . . .
>
> as one of word most true
> and knight of bearing fair. (Tolkien, *Gawain* 38)

Magic often appears in several forms which are separate from or in conflict with Arthur's court. In these situations there is no need to reconcile magic with Arthur's Christian court, as there is no contradiction. Magic was a real force which, in the minds of the medieval audience,

should form an antithetical relationship to Christian people, or at least be separated from these Christian individuals. Wonders and strange happenings seem to exist throughout the Arthurian world, especially in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. The wilderness which embodies all that is not Camelot contains many: a bridge which is a sword, an underwater bridge, a spring which summons storms, a garden surrounded by an invisible wall, and a bleeding lance.[5] Sometimes the wonders do not remain outside of Arthur's court. Indeed, Arthur expects that they will enter his court to challenge him, as he will not sit down to dinner until a "moving marvel" appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Tolkien, *Gawain* 22). Even so, these marvels are intrusions of the magical outside world into Christian Camelot.

Merlin is the prominent figure involved with magic within Arthur's court, as opposed to those exterior magics outside the gates.[6] If Merlin were a holy man and only performed miracles, there would be no problem. If his prophecies were completely in the Old Testament mold, one could not find any contradiction between Merlin and Arthur's Christian court. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Arthur's birth is usually brought about when Merlin enchants Uther Pendragon to resemble Igerne's husband, Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. Obviously, this use of magic is not Christian. To downplay the tension, it is possible to reduce Merlin's role or

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[5] The sword bridge and underwater bridge appear in Chrètien's *The Knight of the Cart*. The storm-spring is from *The Knight with the Lion*, while the walled garden is found in *Erec and Enide*. The lance is a mysterious symbol in the fragmentary *The Story of the Grail*.

[6] The other magicians involved closely with Arthur's court are Morgan and the Lady/Ladies of the Lake. The paradoxical association of the immensely powerful magic of Morgan with Arthur's court may have been one of the driving forces behind her demonization from the Goddess of Geoffrey of Monmouth to the evil witch of Malory. The Lady of the Lake is similar, but authors have used this character of ambiguous morality to drive plot (as in Malory's "Balin") or to foil Morgan's evil, as was done beginning in the *Suite du Merlin* (Rosenberg 363).

make him very mysterious, both of which were done by Thomas Malory. It is only when Merlin's characterization is important to the author that a balance between magic and Christianity must be worked out in a text. The prose *Merlin* and its sequels are an important example of this. As a less developed example, it will be useful to examine the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who first brought together many of the elements of the modern Arthurian legend.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's works bring Merlin and Arthur together for the first time. Although the character of Merlin owes much to Welsh sources and some to characters from Nennius's history, Geoffrey creates him for the first time in the form that a modern reader could recognize (Galyon and Thundy 57). However, his role in Arthur's life is not as extensive in Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* as it was to become in later works. Geoffrey's later work, the *Vita Merlini*, is focused on Merlin but is set nearly a century after the events Merlin is involved with in the *History*. For this reason, there are some flashbacks to events in Arthur's reign unseen in the *History* (Parry 71-72).

Geoffrey created a very mysterious character in Merlin. In Geoffrey, Merlin's father is not specifically classified as a demon from Hell, a fallen angel like Lucifer. He is a more classical figure, a demon of Greek philosophy who lives between the moon and the earth (*History* 168). This unusual parentage is the only explanation for Merlin's preternatural powers of prophecy, knowledge, and friendship with animals. It seems that Merlin simply knows much more than most people. He is able to interpret the stars giving him some foreknowledge, both in the *Vita* and the *History* (where he interprets the dragon star that heralds Aurelius's death; 201). His conversation with Taliesin shows a keen understanding of nature and geography (*Vita* 83-

92). His transformation of Uther is even explained away by his great root- and herb-lore (*History* 206-207). A possible explanation for Merlin's friendship with animals might be the amount of time that he spent in the forest with them as a madman, or the status of his father as a force of nature (*Vita* 75, 80-81).

One troublesome element remains. When Merlin is called by Uther to explain the portentous star which heralds Aurelius's death, "He burst into tears, summoned up his familiar spirit, and prophesied aloud" (*History* 201). Apparently, at times, it is this "familiar spirit" which enables him to prophesy and which apparently is passed on to Ganieda, his sister at the conclusion of the *Vita*: Merlin asks her: "does the Spirit wish you to foretell future things, since he has closed up my mouth and my book? Therefore this task is given to you; rejoice in it, and under my favor devoted to him speak everything" (98). It is possible that Minerva, Taliesin's associate who assists him to prophesy, is also a familiar spirit (*Vita* 82). While it might be possible that Merlin, like the Old Testament prophets, was given his knowledge by the Spirit of God, the phrase "familiar spirit" rules that out. This phrase is associated specifically with forbidden witchcraft in the Old Testament. There are repeated warnings against consulting with those who have a familiar spirit. Indeed, Saul, the first king of Israel, drove out all such people from his kingdom. His famous consultation with the "witch" of Endor is recounted in 1 Samuel 28. If Minerva is indeed a spirit, this is another classical reference (to the Roman goddess of wisdom). Rather than casting Merlin's incompatible magics as being in direct opposition to Christianity, Geoffrey may be giving them an antiquity and legitimacy as something parallel to Christianity by connecting them to Greco-Roman culture.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Robert de Boron, a French cleric, decided to

write the story of Arthur into a more Christian epic of the Holy Grail (Brown, "Boron" 101). The verse work was to be in three parts: *Joseph of Arimathea*, *Merlin*, and *Perceval*. These poems have been almost completely lost; however, Robert, or a successor, wrote a prose summary of the *Merlin* work, usually referred to as the prose *Merlin*. A prose manuscript of the third exists that may be close to Robert's original vision called the Didot-*Perceval*. This saga creates a Christ-like Merlin whose primary purpose is to orchestrate the quest for the Holy Grail (Brown, "Boron" 101-103).

Between 1215 and 1235, another author (or group of authors) decided to tell the whole Arthurian/Grail story on a huge scale. The individual works which made up this epic, called the Vulgate cycle, were *Estoire del Saint Graal*, *Estoire de Merlin*, *Lancelot*, *La Quest del Saint Graal*, and *La Mort Artu* (Lacy ix-x). The *Estoire de Merlin* puts more focus on Arthur and his military victories than did the prose *Merlin*, but many of these victories are owed to Merlin's magic. Merlin is always good, and assists Arthur, except when he is enthralled by Viviane (Lacy xxiii; Brown, "Boron" 103).

Another later epic exists which removes much of the courtliness and mysticism of the Vulgate cycle; it shifts the focus entirely to Arthur. In this work, the *Estoire del Saint Graal* is completely the same, as is the Merlin work up to the point of Arthur's coronation. After the coronation, the story begins to diverge and this part of it is known as the *Suite du Merlin*. This post-Vulgate cycle, as it has been called, also eliminates the Lancelot material, reworks the Grail Quest, and shortens the *La Mort Artu* (Asher 163-164). The *Suite* makes Merlin darker, and has him withhold information from Arthur, something the Merlins of Robert's prose work and the *Estoire* would never do (Brown, "Boron" 103).

In the prose *Merlin*, Merlin's life is characterized by balance. His life is brought about by demons who seek to negate the power of Christ, so they plan to give him the power to see the past. His mother's virtuous actions inspire God to give Merlin knowledge of the future and the choice of whom he would serve (Robert, Rosenberg 306-308). Merlin obviously chooses the side of God, but he is continuously confronted with those who call his knowledge the work of the devil (Robert, Rosenberg 310).

Merlin has many magical powers: he moves the Irish giant's ring to England to become Stonehenge, and he often changes shape. His magic is usually very vague and only referred to, not seen. These magical acts can be considered anti-Christian, so perhaps this is why Merlin's actions are consistently good, to maintain the balance. He even performs some actions that seem to be directed by God, such as the creation of the Round Table as an echo of the Grail table (Robert, Rosenberg 327-330). Even so, Merlin does have a rather pranksterish personality. When Vortigern sends men seeking after him, he strikes a rich boy intentionally, knowing the boy will curse him and draw the attention of Vortigern's messengers (Robert, Brown 104). This can also be seen in his shape-shifting. When Uther and Pendragon seek him out, he plays tricks on their messengers with this power (Robert, Brown 109).

Merlin's only truly sinful action in the prose *Merlin* lies in bringing Uther to Ygerne in disguise, so that Arthur can be conceived. Merlin does this in return for a pledge that Uther will grant him whatever he wants (Robert, Rosenberg 337). When the child is born, he tells Uther that "I am not yet absolved of mine [sin] in helping him to deceive her and facilitate the conception of child whose father she does not know" (Robert, Rosenberg 345). Arranging Arthur's fosterage seems to be the penance Merlin seeks. Arthur's kingdom will create the

perfect Grail knight (Perceval), and so Merlin's sin still serves a greater good.

The *Suite du Merlin* does not have the same religious sentiment as the prose *Merlin*, although the Christian ideal is still upheld. Even so, Merlin uses magic much more than he did in the prose predecessor to this work. His primary focus in this work is wooing Niviane the Huntress, a young woman who wants as little to do with him as possible. She even talks to him about the change in his demeanor. She even says about Arthur, "it is wrong for you to let him fall into such danger! You should always be at his court to protect him, not far away as you are" (Rosenberg 355). He responds that he does not wish to return to England because of his love for her and because he knows that he will die if he does so. He does not even know who is planning his death. The irony is that Niviane is the one he should fear. By allowing his focus to be taken away from God's plan for the Grail Quest and the protection of Arthur, he must pay for his sins. His death is this punishment. Interestingly, Niviane takes on the role of Arthur's magical protectress after Merlin has been imprisoned, restoring Excalibur to the king after Morgan the Fay has stolen it (Rosenberg 363).

The difference in the character of Merlin in Robert de Boron's original conception and the Vulgate and post-Vulgate continuations can be seen in his final scenes of the Didot-*Perceval* and the *Suite du Merlin*. In the *Perceval*, having completed his mission of supervising the Grail Quest, Merlin takes Arthur (a background character) to Avalon for healing (Brown, "Boron" 102). Merlin then takes his leave of Perceval and retreats from the world to live in a hermitage called the Esplumoir[7] of Merlin. "At that Merlin went away and built his Esplumoir and went

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[7] This is actually a pun. Merlin is also a common noun meaning "falcon". An esplumoir is a cage for a hunting falcon.

inside and was never seen in the world again" (Brown, *Didot* 127). This is quite far from the scene in the *Suite* where it mentions that "the last cry that Merlin ever uttered in that grave in which he lay trapped. . . . came from the sharp pain he felt when he realized that he was being killed by a woman's cunning and that a woman's craft had defeated his own" (Rosenberg 363).

These epic cycles were overshadowed in popularity by the next important writer of Arthurian tales, Sir Thomas Malory. Indeed, his work was so influential that for several centuries following Malory's work, new versions of the stories of Arthur became less frequent. Not until Tennyson wrote *The Idylls of the King* was there another popular version of the stories.[8] However, in more recent years, the number of Arthurian retellings has multiplied greatly. Although many of the newer works are often accused of being science-fiction or fantasy tripe with formulaic plots and lifeless characters, some are being recognized as having literary merit.[9] These include works by T. H. White, Mary Stewart, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Stephen Lawhead.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* looks at events as depicted in Malory from the point of view of the women involved. Morgaine is one of the main protagonists, and so is depicted in a more positive light than in Malory's work. This work has a strong component of religion, both Christian and pagan, while magic also plays a large role.

Stephen Lawhead's series, *The Pendragon Cycle*, currently consists of four books: *Taliesin*, *Merlin*, *Arthur*, and *Pendragon*. These works present the circumstances of the lives of

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[8] See Lacy and Ashe for a thorough examination of the works written between Malory and Tennyson.

[9] See Lagino and Day.

the important characters over a span of nearly a century. Arthur's kingdom begins with the marriage of Atlantean and Welsh cultures in *Taliesin* and ends after his death in *Arthur.*[10] Lawhead's visionary tales follow the Welsh and Latin stories more than the French tradition. For example, Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere) is stolen by Medraut (Mordred) in his attempt to usurp Arthur's kingship, and she has no romantic entanglements with Llych Llenlleawg (Lancelot).

Both authors take liberties with their source materials. Bradley does so to support her characterization of Morgaine. Lawhead is not afraid to alter characters, either. In his works, Gwenhwyfar is a pious Irish warrior queen, not a passive possession. Each interweaves magic, Christianity, and paganism into a fascinating story, although they make very different uses of them.

Modern authors face a very different set of circumstances than did medieval writers. Modern historical and sociological studies about the time when Arthur may have lived have changed our view of the world in which he lived. It is no longer acceptable to blatantly project contemporary social situations on people of the past in the manner that Chrétien and Malory did. Audiences expect some historical accuracy (in a different manner than did the medieval audiences), which has led many, when they do discuss religion, to include the pagan beliefs of the Celtic peoples as a part of the Arthurian world. Christianity's main opponent often becomes paganism in the modern stories rather than magic.

Magic in modern fantasy literature no longer assumes the antithetical role toward Christianity which, in medieval works, it once held. This is possibly a consequence of modern

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[10] *Pendragon* and a promised fifth book tell of events which happen between those narrated in the previous works.

fantasy being, in effect, fairy tales for adults (in fairy tales, moral judgments about magic are lacking). It may also be partly a result of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien. In addition to spawning tremendous interest, Tolkien created regard for the modern genre of fantasy. In his trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the most powerful forces for good is, in fact, Gandalf, a wizard. In other writings, it is clear that Tolkien conceives of this user of powerful magic as an angel.[11] Creating an angelic wizard shows a view of magic that differs from the medieval writers and that continues throughout modern fantasy, one in which magic is, at least, neutral.

Both Lawhead and Bradley portray magic as something which can be used for both good and evil purposes. Most magic is developed through training, and is usually thought of as the manipulation of natural forces to produce incredible effects. One aspect of magic in both authors' works is an ability called the Sight, which is generally neutral. Deities also make appearances, and otherwise interact with the world of humans in both novels, producing effects which can be classified as magic.

Many people in both created worlds possess a psionic ability called the Sight. In Lawhead's works, Charis, the future Lady of the Lake, uses this power naturally from her childhood in Atlantis. It usually gives frustratingly vague images of faraway events and future things (*Taliesin* 8-9). In her case, she initially uses a crystal ball called the Lia Fail, while

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[11]We learn through another character in the trilogy that Gandalf's name was "Olórin . . . in . . youth in the West that is forgotten" (Tolkien, *Towers* 279). In a listing of the Valar, the powerful guardians of Middle-Earth, and their servants the Maiar, Olórin appears as the name of a Maia whose wisdom and pity surpasses all (*Valaquenta* 30-31). The Valar are called Powers, and their servants, the Maiar, are "of the same order. . . but of less degree" (*Valaquenta* 25, 30). According to the critic Paul Kocher, this phraseology shows that Tolkien was using the medieval conception of orders of angels, and keeping his spirits all within one order (35-36). These spirits are the creation of Eru, the One, and ultimately draw their power from him (*Valaquenta* 25).

Taliesin, like most druids, enters the "Otherworld" in a trance to utilize his (8-9, 56, 251-258). As time passes, both Charis and Taliesin decrease their use of these methods to See. Merlin, their child also inherits this ability. He tends to use fire-gazing or "the black oak water of the Seeing Bowl" as his trigger (*Merlin* 69-70, *Arthur* 61-62). It is usually implied to be a natural ability, unconnected to God or the devil, and its ultimate source is never actually revealed.

In Bradley's work, the Sight is also a power inherent in some individuals. It is, however, a broader power which can be used to communicate over long distances. One who possesses it can create a Sending which can only be seen by another with the Sight (4-5, 25). Those with the Sight can also perceive oncoming death, as a fetch, a precursor of death (25). The Sight always comes unbidden, although one can conjure it by an act of will; however, meddling with magic untrained is always a risky proposition (83). In both works (but Bradley's to a greater extent), the more narrow-minded among the Christian leaders condemn the Sight, mostly because they do not understand it. Closely linked with the Sight in both authors' works is prophecy. This usually comes unbidden to the mouth of the speaker. The source of the words is very often mysterious, as when Charis feels "words formed in her mind as if written in flame: I am the Mother of Nations; I am the Womb of Knowledge. . . I am Atlantis" (Lawhead, *Taliesin* 54).

Many other abilities are available to those with the correct training, be it from the druids, priestesses, the *bhean sidhe* (the Little People, who are common to both authors' works), or other sources. All of these groups have different types of magic, most of which can be used for good or evil. Bradley's Morgaine remarks that the magic of the fairies predates the magic of the druids, showing than these magics are separate (Bradley 677). At times, Charis, Merlin, Taliesin, and Avallach (the Fisher King) are capable of magic in Lawhead's books, while all of

the main characters of Bradley's novel with the exception of Gwenhwyfar use magic. Lawhead's primary characters, all Christians, use their magics to achieve God's purposes. The variety of powers that they have available to them are tremendous; for example, Lawhead's Merlin occasionally produces incredible effects with his powers, which are the result of training from numerous sources, both Christian and converted pagans. He can start fires, raise mists, and levitate (*Merlin* 67, *Arthur* 186-187, *Taliesin* 280-283). The druids, some good and some evil, all have the ability to summon their *awen*, a trance state in which their words have power over the natural world and access to the Sight is much easier. Taliesin calls the wind in an early use of his *awen* (*Taliesin* 337-339). Not all magic is Lawhead's work is good, as the author's depiction of the character of Morgian can attest. In Bradley's work, magic is often used for both good and evil purposes by the same characters. Morgaine creates the miraculous scabbard, which prevents its owner from losing blood, in support of Arthur's reign, but later calls on the Goddess to kill her enemy and step-son Avalloch as the first step in her plan to depose Arthur (198, 671-672). Despite the difference in intentions, both of these magical events are very debilitating, perhaps demonstrating why magic is performed less conspicuously in Bradley's work: the intensity of the Goddess's power is not something to be taken likely.

Higher powers also intervene in the affairs of the world. Although Lawhead's works are full of appearances of the God of the Christians, and also feature an appearance of the Adversary himself, it is interesting that the first two deities to make actual appearances are the Horned God of the druids and Bel, the sun god of Atlantis. The mad prophet, Throm, identifies the mysterious white bull with whom Charis had danced in the bull-ring as Bel (*Taliesin* 217). Throm's apparent ravings accurately foretell the downfall of Atlantis, so there is no reason to

doubt his identification of this white bull with golden horns, whose death heralds an earthquake (205-211). The death of the bull is also a sign, perhaps, that Charis will lead her people to Christianity, as opposed to following dead gods like Bel. Later, Taliesin follows a white stag into an ancient ring of standing stones where he Sees Cerunnos, the Horned God. This ancient being wishes for the human sacrifices which once honored him to begin again (*Taliesin* 293-299). Cerunnos is one of the gods to whom the druids will turn after they have rejected Christianity.

In Bradley's work, the Goddess often acts through her priestesses, but they just as often question the reality of any Goddess other than themselves. Viviane and Morgaine both deal with this problem (352, 803). Only in one circumstance does the Goddess actually appear; most of her other appearances are merely the glamour of the priestesses. In this instance, the Goddess appears to carry the Grail and then remove it from the world (766-776, 812-813). A similar description accompanies the unleashing of the power of the Grail to heal Merlin and, later, Arthur, in Lawhead's works (*Arthur* 93-94, 432-434).

In Lawhead, the Christian God makes a few significant appearances. He first appears when Hafgan takes the child Merlin with him to tell the Learned Brotherhood of druids that the truth for which they have always sought is Jesus. They initially scoff at the idea of worshiping Christ and Christ alone. When their doubt extends to questioning the circumstances of Merlin's birth, the *omphalos*, the power that the ring of standing stones was built upon, awakes. The luminous beings of the Otherworld (possibly angels) gather around, unseen by all but Merlin. The leader of these beings indicates that Merlin should climb the central stone. When he has done so, it rises into the air and this so-called Ancient One speaks through him, telling the

druids:

> Why do you wonder that the wisest among you should greet you in the name of Jesu, who called himself the Way and the Truth? How is it that you, who seek truth in all ways, should be blind to it now? Do you believe because you see a floating stone?. . . Perhaps you will believe if *all* the stones danced? (43)

Merlin's foot prints are left in the stone on which he stood. As time goes on, some of the druids do convert, but many return to the old ways, which Taliesin had refused when he turned from Cerunnos (*Merlin* 40-44). Shortly before Merlin is cured of his madness, he receives visits from God and the Devil (*Merlin* 213-217, 218-238). In fact, his visitor Annwas (God) cures him and washes him to prepare him for the work of ordering the kingdom. Later, a genuine miracle accompanies Arthur's first victory, one which Merlin cannot even explain. The vats of beer continuously refill themselves (*Pendragon* 90-94). The blindness from which Merlin suffers as a result of his combat with Morgian is healed by an Irish priest in a miracle which leads to the conversion of many of the Irish (*Pendragon* 121-123). The most mysterious part of the whole cycle is suggested by the narrator Aneirin to be the work of God. When the Fisher King's palace vanishes from Ynys Avallon along with Arthur, Merlin, Charis (the Lady of the Lake), and Avallach (the Fisher King), Arthur's kingdom is left in shambles.

The magical effects which accompany the Goddess and the gods in their appearances are a part of magic which, in these works, although tied to both paganism and Christianity, is opposed to neither religion in the way in which it was in medieval texts. Only one type of magic assumes an antithetical relationship to religion, and it opposes both the pagans and Christians of these novels. Marion Zimmer Bradley first hints at this dark magic when Viviane discusses the

Goddess's triple aspect with Igraine. Viviane indicates Morgaine and says:

> 'She is not yet a maiden, and I not yet a wise-woman,' she said, 'but we are the Three, Igraine. Together we make up the Goddess, and she is here present among us.' Igraine wondered why she had not named their sister Morgause, and . . . [Viviane] said in a whisper, and Igraine saw her shiver, 'The Goddess has a fourth face, which is secret, and you should pray to her, as I do – as I do, Igraine – that Morgause will never wear that face' (23)

Unfortunately, this fear is realized. Morgause is described by her foster son, Mordred, as "one who had no fear of any Goddess or any God" (866). In a terrifying portion of the work, the reader is shown the fearsome paths that magic sundered from training or religion can follow; Morgause requires only ruthlessness and will to access it. She must draw blood in order to achieve her fearsome power, and she works her way up from a cat to a houseservant. She manages to counterfeit the Sight although she has very little of it naturally. The language and the imagery in the vivid bloodletting scene convey well the horrifying nature of this type of magic (816-821). The "faces" of the Goddess are tied to the phases of the moon: maiden, mother, and crone represent the full, half, and crescent moons. The fourth phase, the new moon, is linked with the dark magic of blood and death. Curiously, the fourth face of the Goddess is also worn by the young woman Nimue, a faithful priestess of Avalon. When she seduces and betrays the Merlin, the spells of entrapment she weaves must be culminated at the dark of the moon, at the time of her menstrual flow. She mentions that magic is not usually done at that time because the power is then darkened and evil (794-795).

Lawhead has a less pragmatic, but no less frightening view, of evil magic (or, perhaps, it

is that his characters are typically more altruistic than Bradley's). The first hints of distrust about magic occur when Charis meets the mysterious Danae, High Queen of Atlantis. She is an enchantress able to change her appearance and spy on others (*Taliesin* 114-117). Although Charis is drawn to her, it is this power which is learned by the beautiful Morgian. Combined with the increasingly darker powers of Annubi, Avallach's seer, these abilities serve Morgian well as the Queen of Air and Darkness. Although Morgian only appears a handful of times, she casts a dark pallor over the entire cycle. It is her manipulations which kill Taliesin and Pelleas, drive a wedge of guilt into Gwalcmai and Gwalchavad, and lead Medraut to try to usurp Arthur's kingdom. Her few appearances are marked with very descriptive passages which drive home her evil, such as this description by Merlin:

> around her, or behind her like spreading black wings or a living, invisible shadow, I saw an aura, brooding dark and ugly, as if made up of all the nameless horrors of nightmare. This thing seemed alive with churning, writhing torment, and it clung to her – although whether it was part of her or she part of it, I cannot say. But it was a real presence, as much as fear or hate or cruelty are real. (200)

Morgian is driven to the paths of evil in pursuit of quick power. She is started along this path by Annubi, Avallach's jealous seer who is uncomfortable with the growing Christian power in the Fisher King's court. She soon surpasses Annubi in the arts of magic and continually searches for more. Merlin suspects she has learned from the anti-Christian druids. Her black-heartedness extends beyond her search for power; her presence in the Orcades creates an incestuous family which, in the end, destroys Arthur's kingdom.

Many authors reduce the role of religion in the Arthurian stories; indeed, this is

traditional in the fantasy genre. Bradley and Lawhead both use the relationship between paganism and Christianity to explore other issues. Lawhead, much as he does in his other works, establishes this relationship in a way which shows the primacy and truth of Christianity. Bradley's work is widely recognized for its feminism (Fries, Thompson), but it also explores the need for acceptance in a religiously pluralistic society.[12] The constant tension and struggle between Christianity and paganism underlines this need.

The progress of many of the characters through *The Mists of Avalon* shows the general theme of acceptance and religious tolerance. Two sets of characters remain thoroughly in the background, but are consistently portrayed as tolerant of all religious beliefs: the druids and the followers of Joseph of Arimathea. The druids are represented by Taliesin the Merlin and his successor Kevin. They constantly call for acceptance of the idea that all Gods are one. When they realize that Christianity will prevail, they choose to follow it, but attempt to incorporate as many of the Mysteries of the old ways as possible into Christianity and to combat its more narrow-minded elements. Kevin says as much when he is to be executed for violating the cave of the Regalia (800). The followers of Joseph of Arimathea even remain on Avalon when it is separated from the Isle of the Priests. Their worship does not exclude the Goddess, as does the worship of Christians of the mold of Bishop Patricius. Although these accepting Christians remain marginal, Galahad discovers that Goddess has left the Grail in their care after she had removed it from the world (812-813). Gwenhwyfar is, for most of the novel, a staunch anti-

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[12] Despite this call for acceptance, much of the book seems rather negatively disposed toward Christianity. The focus on the narrow-minded Christians of Gwenhwyfar's mold rather then Joseph's Avalonian disciples is a part of it. This could be attributed to the primacy of Morgaine as the focus, but another possibility is Christianity's role as conveyer and encourager of oppressive patriarchy for the past several centuries.

pagan Christian. She lives her life in shame and guilt, having internalized much of the anti-feminist teachings of the church as her own thoughts (264-268). She believes, for example, her rape by Maleagrant to be her own fault (513, 515-516, 527).

Morgaine's spiritual journey is the focus of the novel. It is this path to which the author directs the most attention. Morgaine is raised a strict Christian and is hesitant to use the Sight when first prompted by Viviane, as her stepfather, Uther, had forbade "sorceries" (121-123). She is soon taken to Avalon and becomes an ardent worshipper of the Goddess, although she shares the view of the druids, that all Gods are One and Christianity should be tolerated. Her break with her beliefs comes in two parts. When she feels used by Viviane in Arthur's kingmaking, she flees from Avalon (228-231). Her regret over this act keeps her from returning for several years. During this time, she is resistant but not hostile toward Christianity, and not especially predisposed toward the worship of Avalon either. This changes when she learns that Arthur has used the Sword of the Holy Regalia to uphold Christianity in violation of his oath to Avalon. With Viviane's murder and burial on the Isle of the Priests. Morgaine returns to her Avalonian beliefs and no longer holds any hope of reconciliation with Christians (498-499, 502-505). Once her affair with Accolon has rekindled her powers as a priestess (588-591), she hatches her plan to dethrone Arthur (673-678). At this point, she has become as intractable as Bishop Patricius[13] in her beliefs. When she returns to Avalon, her mindset does not change until she listens to Kevin's defense of his theft of the Holy Regalia:

> we must go into the mists further and further until we are no more than a legend

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[13] who, it must be said, does an excellent job of rationalizing all supernatural events which do not fit his belief structure, as either angelic/Virginal or demonic in nature.

> and a dream. Would you take the Holy Regalia with you into that darkness, preserving it carefully against the dawning of a new day that now shall never be? Even if Avalon should perish, I felt it right that the holy things should be sent forth into the world in the service of the Divine, by whatever name God or the Gods may be called. And because of what I have done, the Goddess manifested herself at least once in the world yonder, in a way that shall never be forgotten. . . I do not think that wasted, nor should you, who bore that chalice as her priestess. (800)

This softens her, as does her encounter with the nuns of Glastonbury, who are the first strong Christian women Morgaine has known. Her final prayer reveals her acceptance that the Goddess will continue to work despite the apparent lack of servants. Morgaine recognizes that the power of the Divine does exist in Christianity, and she can accept that "her work was done" (876).

Stephen Lawhead presents his message, that of the supremacy of Christianity, in a more straight-forward manner than Bradley presents hers. Most characters quickly convert when exposed to Christianity. Those who refuse it for a while are seen as hard-headed or superstitious like the Irish kings (*Pendragon* 120-122). Other refusers are seen as sinister, like Morgian. Many druids turn from the worship of Christ. They believe that the troubles of Britain stem from abandonment of the old ways, so they renew human sacrifice to Cerunnos, a practice which Merlin identifies as "darker, perverse, and willfully unholy" (*Merlin* 154). The frequent appearances and interventions of the Christian God show His reality and power. The best example of this is his spectacular demonstration of power in the dancing stones before the Learned Brotherhood (*Merlin* 42-44).

The difference in focus of the two works, *The Mists of Avalon* and the *Pendragon Cycle*, can be seen in the death scenes of Arthur. In *The Mists of Avalon*, Arthur believes he has failed. Morgaine comforts him saying:

> You did not fail, my brother, my love, my child. You held this land in peace for many years, so that the Saxons did not destroy it. You held back the darkness for a whole generation, until they were civilized men, with learning and music and *faith in God*, who will fight to save something of the beauty of the times that are past. If this land had fallen to the Saxons when Uther died, then would all that was beautiful or good have perished forever from Britain. And so you did not fail, my love. None of us knows how she will *do her will -- only that it will be done*. (868) [emphasis mine]

The important thing is faith, not the object of the faith, as it is apparently the Goddess's will that men have faith in the Christian God. This probably connects to the concept of all Gods being One. Or, perhaps, it is merely another Mystery beyond human understanding like the appearance of the Grail in Arthur's court at Pentecost.

In the *Pendragon Cycle*, Arthur is repeatedly identified as the King of Summer.[14] Merlin describes him as "the fairest flower of our race, Cymry's most noble son, Lord of the Summer Realm, Pendragon of Britain. He wore God's favor like a purple robe" (*Arthur* 12). Merlin only receives confirmation of his hopes when Avallach recognizes Arthur as the Summer Lord, or so he tells Bedwyr (*Arthur* 134-135). As he is carried to Avallon the final time, Arthur apologizes for not being the kind of king Merlin wanted -- the King of Summer. Merlin's reply is "you were

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[14] see Appendix Three

the king God wanted. Nothing else matters" (*Arthur* 431).

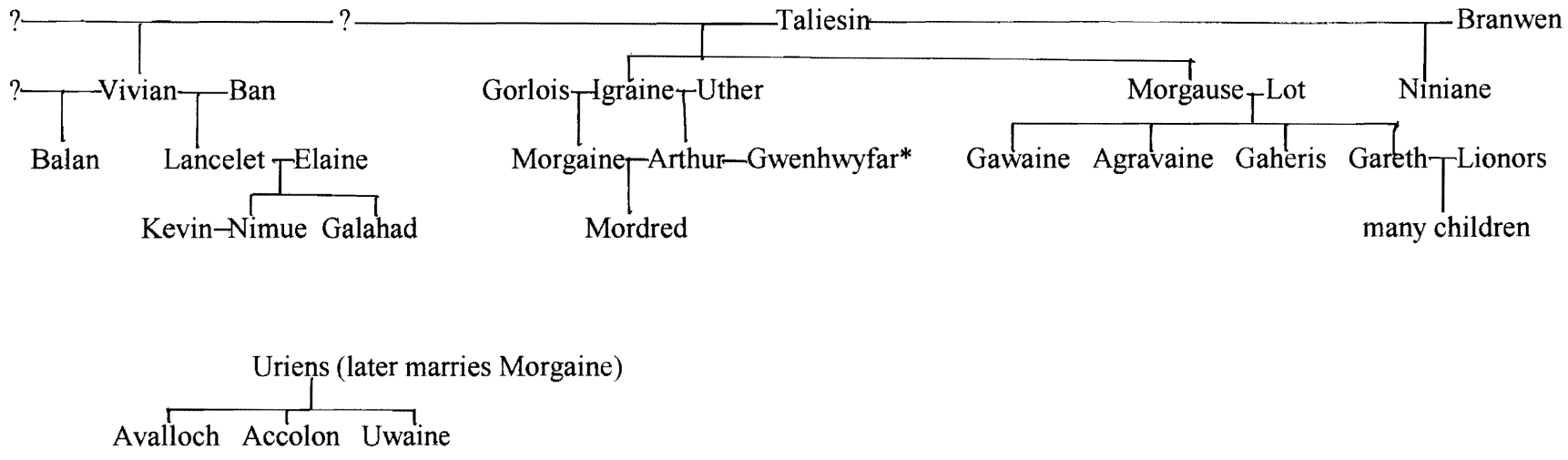
Religion (especially Christianity) and magic are two parts of the immense tapestry which is the corpus of Arthurian texts. Given the medieval view that magic is, for the most part, evil and always completely un-Christian, and the perception of Arthur's Camelot as a Christian court, magic in medieval works must exist outside of Arthur's court. Only when it is part of Arthur's court, as in the case of Merlin, is there a problem. The tension inherent in the character of a magic-user in a Christian court can be ignored at the author's discretion, but when the characterization of Merlin is important, a balance between magic and Christianity must be developed in the text. In the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Merlin's magic is a heritage from ancient Greece, making it parallel to Christianity, not opposed to it. In the works of Robert de Boron (and his successors to a lesser degree), Merlin is a strange balance between Heaven and Hell which God allows to serve Him. It seems that when Merlin sways the balance too far toward Hell, he dies. Both Geoffrey and Robert develop the idea of Merlin more than many other Arthurian authors in the medieval period. In any case, the relationship between magic and Christianity affects the portrayal of magic-users of all kinds and the structure of Arthur's court in medieval texts.

Modern Arthurian interpretations tend to reduce the tension between magic and Christianity by making magic a phenomenon which is inherently neutral. A tense relationship, however, often exists between Christianity and paganism; this relationship can be shaped to fit an author's purpose, as in the works of Marion Zimmer Bradley and Stephen Lawhead. As with all Arthurian materials, the relationship between the cross and the cauldron has changed over time; even so it always affects the portrayal of characters and events that impacted the life of

Arthur, King that was, and King that is to come.

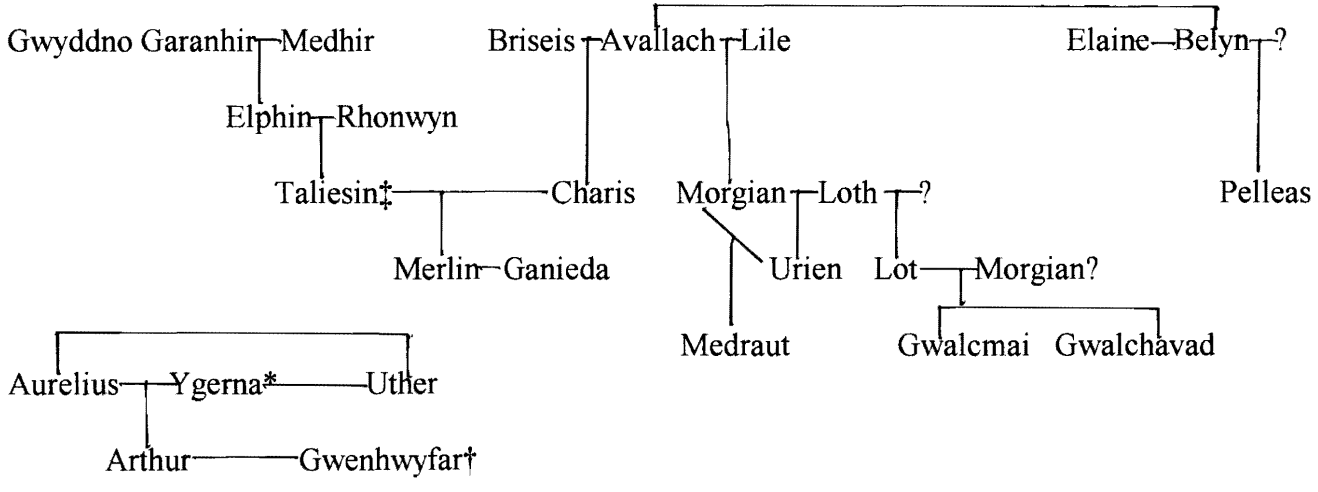
Appendix One: Family Trees

The Mists of Avalon



* Gwenhwyfar's father is Leodegranz, and Maleagrant may be her brother

The Pendragon Cycle



* Ygerna's father is Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall
† Gwenhwyfar is the daughter of Fergus, King of Ierne
‡ Adopted

Appendix Two: Chronology

c. 600	*Gododdin*
c. 800	Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*
end of the 11th C.	*Culhwch and Olwen*
1125	William of Malmesbury's *The Deeds of the English Kings*
c. 1136	Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and *Vita Merlini*
1170	Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec and Enide*
mid 1170's	Chrétien de Troyes's *Cliges*
late 1170's	Chrétien de Troyes's *The Knight of the Cart* and *The Knight with the Lion*
c. 1190	Chrétien de Troyes's *The Story of the Grail*
c. 1200	Robert de Boron's *Joseph of Arimathea*, *Merlin*, and *Perceval*
1215 - c. 1235	The Vulgate and post-Vulgate Cycles
14th C.	*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
1485	Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* published
****	
1834-1885	Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* published
1958	T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*
1970's	Mary Stewart's trilogy
1982	Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*
1987	Stephen Lawhead's *Taliesin*
1988	Stephen Lawhead's *Merlin*
1989	Stephen Lawhead's *Arthur*
1994	Stephen Lawhead's *Pendragon*

Appendix Three: The Kingdom of Summer

There is a land shining with goodness where each man protects his brother's dignity as his own, where war and want have ceased and all races live under the same law of love and honor.

It is a land bright with truth, where a man's word is his pledge, and falsehood is banished, where children sleep safe in their mother's arms and never know fear or pain. It is a land where kings extend their hands in justice rather than reach for the sword; where mercy, kindness, and compassion flow like deep water over the land, and men revere virtue, revere truth, revere beauty, above comfort, pleasure, or selfish gain. A land where peace blazes like a beacon from every hill, and love like a fire from every hearth, where the True God is worshiped and his ways acclaimed by all . . .

There is a golden realm of light, my son. And it is called the Kingdom of Summer.

Charis to Merlin (Lawhead, *Merlin* 108-109)

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